

Ronald Carter & Michael McCarthy. Cambridge Grammar of English. A Comprehensive Guide. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

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- What is the difference between the following linking adjuncts often used in academic language: *on the contrary*, *by contrast*, *on the other hand*?
- What is meant by *hiya*, *wassup*, *tarra luv*, *sloooooooooow dn* and; - in internet discourse?
- Is the prepositional phrase in *Just don't lose your belief **in his talent*** a modifier or a complement in the noun phrase?
- What do native speakers of English express with the interjection *tut-tut*?
- How can 'hedging' (expressing a viewpoint more assertively) and 'boosting' (making a proposition less assertive) be achieved in academic writing?
- How do you disagree politely in English?

The *Cambridge Grammar of English* (CGE) written by Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy and published by one of the largest and most prestigious academic publishers gives you answers to these and hundreds of similar questions. This excellent book is a major new reference grammar which has been designed for anyone with a serious interest in the grammar of English.

While previous grammar books have given greater attention to the written language, CGE offers a more balanced approach, and devotes as much attention to the spoken language as to the written one. Many of their examples are taken from the 700 million-word corpus of spoken and written English called the Cambridge International corpus, which is composed of real texts taken from a great variety of sources.

As far as the arrangement of the material is concerned, GCE is organised differently from other contemporary grammar books. Its introductory chapter is concerned with the parts and basic principles of grammar in general, the peculiarities of CGE, the relation of grammar and corpus data and includes the organisation of the book. It is followed by a unique section called A-Z, in which the lexico-grammar properties of frequent words are described. Since these lexical items are often polysemous and individual in some way in their grammar, they are known to be difficult for learners and often lead to errors. Consider '*quite*' in the following examples (cf. pp. 126–27):

Things began to get worse *quite* quickly. (rather, fairly)

It was *quite* impossible to have a conversation with him. (totally, completely)

You've got *quite* a garden here. (a noteworthy example of)

I thought he was *quite* a nice person. (a rather nice person)

The section A-Z is followed by the topic chapters which include the following: introduction to grammar and spoken English; from utterance to discourse; from discourse to social context; grammar across turns and sentences; grammar and academic English; introduction to word classes and phrase classes; the noun phrase; nouns and determiners; pronouns; verb phrase 1: structure of verb phrase; verb phrase 2: tense and aspect; types of verbs; adjectives and adjective phrases; adverbs and adverb phrases; prepositions and prepositional phrases; word structure and word formation; introduction to sentences and clauses; verb complementation; clause types; clause combination; adjuncts; present time; past time; future time; modality; speech acts; questions; negation; condition; comparison; word order and focus; the passive and speech representation. As evident from the above list, the second section, which makes up three-fifths of the book, covers the traditional categories most grammar books deal with.

The final section of the book consists of the appendices, which give detailed information on punctuation, spelling, irregular verbs, number, measurement, time, nationalities and countries, as well as important differences between British and North American grammatical usage. Besides the appendices, there is also a glossary which contains brief definitions of all the key grammatical terms used in the book.

R. Carter and M. McCarthy use familiar terminology, relying basically on the framework and categories of Quirk et. al. (1985). Overlapping between categories and gradedness are the major reasons why classification is not an easy issue, yet the authors manage to keep a delicate balance. They try to eliminate terms which were rather problematic and confusing in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. As far as modality is

concerned, they avoid using terms like 'intrinsic' vs. 'extrinsic'. Instead, they provide clear explanations of the different meanings of modal verbs. In fact, the authors refer to 'deontic' vs. 'epistemic', but only in the glossary (cf. pp. 900, 902). It is pointed out that terms such as necessity, permission and obligation are used in preference to deontic, while terms, such as certainty, probability or possibility are used in preference to epistemic in their book. Unlike in Quirk et al.'s grammar (1985), *be*, *do* and *have* are not called primary verbs any more in this book, they are simply discussed among auxiliary verbs, which are followed by modal verbs under a different heading (cf. pp. 424–425).

In my experience, it is rather difficult for students to understand the distinction between finite and non-finite verb forms. CGE introduces new terms for them, i.e. tensed and non-tensed. It is argued that tensed verb forms indicate whether a verb is present or past tense. The *s*-form and the past form of the verb are tensed forms. The *-ing* participle and the *-ed* participle are non-tensed forms. The base-form may be tensed or non-tensed. When it has a subject, it is tensed (and it is called the present form), when it is used as the infinitive form (with or without *to*), it is non-tensed (cf. p. 198). I find it a more user-friendly explanation. The terms of finite and non-finite clauses are, however, kept in the chapter on clause types (cf. pp. 532–551). They are defined like this: A finite clause contains a verb which is inflected for tense (present or past), while non-finite clauses contain a lexical verb which does not indicate tense.

Unlike Quirk et al. (1985), the authors of CGE make a distinction between modifiers and complements in noun phrases. While modifiers indicate qualities and attributes of the noun head (e.g. subjective qualities, physical attributes, such as size, colour, material, location in space and time, restricted reference to a particular entity), complements complete the meaning of the noun head (cf. p. 323). Thus the prepositional phrase and the *that*-clause in *A rise **in interest rates** is inevitable* and *The claim **that he was innocently involved** was not accepted by the judge*, respectively are regarded as complements.

The classification of adverbials into adjunct, subjunct, disjunct and conjunct is also avoided. The term is carefully explained as follows: "The adjunct is the fifth major clause function, the other four being subject, verb object and complement. Adjuncts modify, comment on or expand in some way the meaning of the clause in terms of manner, place, time, frequency, reason, intensity, purpose, evaluative, viewpoint, linking, etc." (cf. p. 578). Thus Carter & McCarthy classify adjuncts on the basis of their semantics.

A unique feature of this grammar book is the chapter on grammar and academic English. Although academic writing and speaking, e.g. students'

essays, presentations, dissertations and theses, lectures, conference papers, books and articles, all have different conventions, they have a great deal in common in terms of grammar. This chapter (cf. pp. 268–294) focuses on items and structures which are common in academic language. The authors give us useful guidelines about how information is packaged (typically in rather dense noun phrases), how tense, aspect, voice and modality are used to structure and signpost text, how pronouns create an appropriate relationship with the listener/reader, how sentences are typically linked, and how specific conventions are used (e.g. citing and abbreviations). I am sure that this chapter will be of great help to both students and teachers at colleges and universities.

Another merit of CEG is that a special chapter is devoted to speech acts (cf. pp. 680–713), which also tend to be neglected in other grammar references. Speech acts, such as informing, directing, questioning, requesting, offering, apologising, complaining, suggesting, promising, permitting, forbidding, and predicting, etc. regularly occur in everyday written and spoken interactions, therefore they are an essential prerequisite of a good command of a language. Besides focussing particularly on directives and commissives, the authors also describe how clause structure contributes to different kinds of speech acts and the role of modal verbs and speech act verbs in constructing them.

It is also noteworthy that in the chapter ‘From discourse to social contexts’, the authors refer to swearing and taboo expressions and non-standard spoken and written grammar, which students often meet (cf. pp. 225, 235–36). They, however, warn learners that they should exercise great care concerning such usages. For these non-standard varieties of grammatical forms, five levels of acceptability are outlined: 1. wide-spread use in both spoken and written language 2. wide-spread use in both written and spoken language but not approved in more prescriptive grammar books 3. rare in writing but normal in spoken language (e.g. *I don't know how but **me** and my sister got lost in the market.*) 4. regionally or socially marked (*I know something. That **ain't** the answer.*) 5. non-occurring and unacceptable in all varieties of British English.

In summary, we can say that CGE is a valuable contribution to the description of the grammar of English, and therefore it is a ‘must-have’ for anyone who aims to acquire a thorough knowledge of the major areas of English grammar. The user-friendly lay-out, the wealth of examples taken from spoken and written English, the clear explanation of grammatical terms and concepts make it an excellent book. I am convinced that by this new grammar book Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy have opened the door to success in English for millions of learners.

Reference

Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Ian Svartvik.
1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*.
London: Longman.